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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANJUL 000576

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KMCA](#) [GA](#)  
SUBJECT: THE GAMBIA: UPDATE ON THE MEDIA

REF: A. BANJUL 465

[1](#)B. BANJUL 542

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Classified By: AMBASSADOR JOSEPH STAFFORD,REASON 1.4 (B AND D)

#### SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) The generally negative trend in The Gambia's media environment continues, despite the enhanced media coverage accorded the opposition in connection with its Presidential election campaigning. The National Intelligence Agency detained a television reporter, who was subsequently fired, and questioned a radio program manager. following campaign-related broadcasts seen as too favorable to the opposition, according to our contacts. Several other journalists are awaiting trial, remain in custody without charge, or are missing, and the December 2004 murder of prominent journalist Deyda Hydara remains unsolved -- amidst persistent allegations of official involvement. Authorities reportedly cited the objective of regaining eligibility for the Millenium Challenge Account (MCA) program in permitting the recently-established journal, "Daily Express," to continue publication. It remains to be seen whether, as some sources predict, President Jammeh, following his expected re-election September 22, will be inclined to show greater tolerance for the private media and their criticism; these sources cite The Gambia's improved human rights situation following Jammeh's re-election in 2001. END SUMMARY.

#### OVERVIEW

[1](#)2. (C) In the two months since our last report on The Gambia's overall media environment (ref a), the generally negative trend has continued, highlighted by the strained relationship between the GOTG and the country's private media institutions. In a recent conversation with the Ambassador, The Editor-in-Chief at the independent daily, "The Point," Pap Saine, stated that a climate of fear persisted within the journalistic community due to President Jammeh's clear distaste for the private media and their anti-GOTG criticism. He spoke of widespread self-censorship among journalists, and cited authorities' March closure of the paper, the "Independent," known for its diehard anti-Jammeh stance, as the result of its failure to moderate that stance. .

#### THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION AND THE MEDIA

[1](#)3. (C) The Gambia's restrictive media environment is evident in the coverage of the campaigning for the Presidential election scheduled for September 22. To be sure, the country's several private journals -- in particular, "The

Point," "Foroyaa," and "Daily Express," have been allowed to provide extensive coverage of campaigning by the opposition parties, as well as by Jammeh and his ruling APRC party. A fourth private paper, "The Daily Observer," which actually serves as the GOTG's mouthpiece, has predictably accorded considerably more coverage to the APRC's electioneering than to the opposition's -- notwithstanding a recent agreement by media institutions on a "code of conduct" for election coverage that specified equitable coverage of all competing parties' campaigns. In addition, in accordance with the GOTG's stated policy, the government-owned and operated electronic media establishment -- Gambian Radio and Television Service (GRTS) -- are required to provide each competing party with forty minutes of television and radio coverage daily, 10 minutes for a statement and thirty minutes for political rallies.

#### GOTG MOVES AGAINST JOURNALISTS

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¶4. (C) Given the GOTG's media crackdown in recent months, the media coverage of the opposition's electioneering -- especially by GRTS, which, as a rule, omits any reporting on opposition activities -- is a noteworthy development. However, authorities' actions against several individual journalists -- including two with GRTS -- underscore the limits of the GOTG's tolerance for media freedom. On September 8, authorities detained GRTS television reporter Dodou Sanneh, who was released on September 13, but dismissed from his job. A radio program manager at GRTS, Serigne Fye, was questioned by the National Intelligence Agency (NIA), although not detained or fired. Our sources confirm that the GOTG objected to a television broadcast by Sanneh and a radio broadcast -- which Fye failed to edit -- that were seen as overly favorable to opposition candidates. As previously reported (ref b), on August 29, NIA officials detained "Foroyaa" journalist and opposition activist Amie Sillah for several hours before releasing her without charge.

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¶5. (C) Meanwhile, a journalist with the now-closed "Independent," Lamin Fatty, freed on bail after two months in detention, awaits trial on charges of "printing false information." A former journalist and head of press relations at a hospital, Malick Mboob, picked up in May, remains in detention without charge, to our knowledge. The whereabouts of another journalist, Ebrima Manneh ("Daily Observer"), missing since July, remains unknown, amidst speculation that he is in detention or has fled to Senegal. As for the December 2004 murder of prominent journalist Deyda Hydara, it remains unsolved; allegations of official responsibility persist, and we note recent allegations reported in other USG channels that a special unit within the Presidential security apparatus was involved.

#### THE SAGA OF THE "DAILY EXPRESS"

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¶6. (C) Among the few positive elements in The Gambia's media scene of late, the recently-established journal, "Daily Express," continues to publish. As previously reported (ref a), there were signs that the GOTG would prevent further publication of this paper when it first appeared July 1, as the NIA detained its Nigerian publishers, Sam Obi and Abdou Gafar. The two were released after several days in custody. Interestingly, according to a reliable source, NIA officials told the pair that the GOTG was keen to regain eligibility for the Millenium Challenge Account (MCA) program -- suspended in mid-June due to, inter alia, the GOTG's deteriorating record on human rights -- and that, hence, they would be allowed to continue publishing their twice-weekly journal. The issues of "Daily Express" to date contain mild anti-GOTG criticism and evenly-divided coverage of APRC and opposition electioneering.

COMMENT

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¶7. (C) While the continued publication of "Daily Express" is good news, contacts express doubt that the "Independent" will ever be allowed to resume publication. Moreover, the Gambian branch of the Senegalese-owned Sud FM radio station has yet to return to the air following its closure by the GOTG in October 2005, despite long-standing rumors that the go-ahead from authorities is in the offing. It remains to be seen whether, as some sources predict, following Jammeh's expected re-election September 22, he will be inclined to show greater tolerance for the private media and their criticism; these sources point to The Gambia's improved human rights situation following Jammeh's re-election in the last contest, in 2001.  
END COMMENT.

STAFFORD